

Marchers aim to 'wake up' government, corporations; Student protesters clog Bay St. to demand action in fight against climate change

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Byline: Jason Miller Toronto Star

Body

A wave of students and parents rallied for climate action in downtown Toronto on Friday, aiming to draw attention to what they called an existential climate crisis.

Starting at city hall, the sea of protesters yelled chants demanding immediate action from government officials, including the provincial government, who organizers say have been tone deaf to warnings.

Among them was Grade 2 student Audrey MacMillan, 7, who came with her mother from Stouffville.

"We're trying to protect our future," Audrey said, summing up the general sentiment of the students who marched through the financial district.

Labelled the Fridays for Future climate strike, the local initiative was part of an international protest movement involving student groups from some 125 countries and 1,600 cities across the world, who walked out of class on Friday to call on governments to beef up efforts to curb greenhouse gas emissions.

The protesters yelled chants demanding immediate climate action from government officials, including the provincial government, who organizers say have been tone deaf to warnings.

"We want people to wake up," said Danforth Collegiate and Technical Institute student Saskia Recke-Smith. "We want Toronto to declare a climate emergency. This will wake up the city.

"We're faced with the greatest existential crisis ever," the 16-year-old said.

The marchers said one of their aims is to force the different levels of government to implement a Green New Deal forged from public demands for immediate action on climate change.

Event co-ordinator Ali Rougeot revved up the growing crowd outside city hall, saying demonstrations like Friday's march down a busy city artery are necessary to grab the attention of corporate Canada and government leaders.

"We've been speaking for six months and clearly they don't hear us," said Rougeot, a University of Toronto second-year student, standing before the crowd.

Cecilia La Rose, 14, said the close to a year of sustained global protest - which cropped up in Canada in December - was inspired by 16-year-old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg's own weekly protests in 2018.

"Seeing Greta inspire our generation, we decided that here in Toronto we were lagging behind," said the Riverdale Collegiate Institute student.

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She said increasing instances of forest fires in Western Canada and the recent floods that have created chaos are wake-up calls.

"It's scary," she said. "People living in rural areas and on reserves are the people who will be impacted first."

Friday's march also caught the eye of some curious bystanders, some of whom looked on with bemusement as the stream of protesters made their way down Bay Street.

Florida native Charlie Gillespie, a private chef at the St. Regis Toronto, encountered the protest en route to work.

"My president (Donald Trump) doesn't believe we have global warming and we have a problem," she said.

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